

Mark had been a very successful businessman at a young age. He graduated in Engineering and right after took an MBA. After a few years at the steel mill, he and another employee decided they could go in to business on their own. They set up an operation to make backyard playground equipment. Things went well for 20 years. They got bigger quite quickly. They supplied a retail outlet with a large distribution network. But that was their problem. They were kept so busy supplying that one network, that they didn't diversify their client base. Other problems in the retail network came along and though it looked like the solutions were just around the corner, in the end the distribution network failed and Mark and his partner had no established connections with other clients. When they tried selling through other channels they seemed to be blocked by foreign competition. They laid off all the employees, their partnership ended and Mark was left with an empty warehouse space.

Mark and his wife, Sharon had four children and an uncertain future. Mark was able to rent out his warehouse space and did contract work with the steel mill. They thought things would be ok as they approached their 50s. Their youngest child was in the last stage of university when two things happened within weeks of one another. The market for steel was down and the company decided to get out of the business all together. In the end the unionized employees bought the company for a fair price and new management cut out all contract work. Mark was devastated. Just two weeks after finishing work, one early morning Mark got a call from the fire department. The warehouse was ablaze. The renter was storing toxic chemicals and the draining water from the fire crew was creating a toxic soup that had to be properly dealt with by proper environmental procedures.

The proper workers and authorities were involved in the clean-up. There were no serious injuries. But the renter did not have the appropriate insurance coverage. This started a legal battle. Ever since Mark's company had folded things between he and his wife were troubled. The extra stress of the legal battle just about ended their relationship. The family had been a part of the United Church in their suburban location. Mark sought counsel from the minister. He was also receiving legal and financial advice regarding the results of the warehouse fire.

The long days and Mark's fits of uncharacteristic rage when he was home became more than Sharon could tolerate. She confronted Mark and said things had to change or they were through. Then Mark had a slight heart attack. He knew he had to find a solution and do so quickly. Today Mark would say, that's when God spoke to me. God said, "you better make some very smart changes here or you are going to give up an awful lot." Mark met with those who were advising him in legal, financial, and spiritual matters. He decided that the best thing to do was to declare his business bankrupt.

Thankfully they had been advised many years before to separate out the business assets from personal assets. Their personal assets were in Sharon's name. Sharon had been urging Mark for a long time to take a slower pace. They had mused about owning a small farm. Their youngest daughter was quite interested in running a horse training school.

There was just such a farm not far from one of the congregations I was serving and they bought it. That's when I met Mark and Sharon. I visited them and we talked about the church's routines. They attended church and through a relatively short time became quite involved. When I saw their horse arena I said you know we could have quite a Christmas Eve service in here. Mark said, "Well sure we could do that, why not."

Plans began. There were already 4 horses being boarded in the paddocks, that was a beginning, we'd set up a small area for some other animals. Bob from the church brought his 4 Rhode Island Red chickens. Bill from across the road offered to bring his donkey. Debbie would bring along her two goats. And so it went.

That small church in the hamlet would have 60 people 'tops' out to a Christmas Eve service in the sanctuary. Nineteen years ago we offered that service in the horse arena. For fifteen years there was an average of 300 people who came out to witness the nativity scene plays put on by the congregation and choir. Some came from other churches, most from no church. People came early to see the animals. They stayed after to greet one another. And then there were the 'buckets' at the door-people were invited to make a donation to the local food bank.

It was a different experience and most never tired of it, showing up year after year. Some of the church regulars would rather move back to the coziness of the church furnace. When minister there I would say, "well how many will come if we have the service in the church? And how many if we have it in 'the barn'. The decision was always in favour of staying with the service in the barn. There were no comfortable pews, just some hard back chairs sitting in the sand mixed with horse manure for the floor. And the wind whistled in. But there was something of a reminder of that first nativity scene.

One knows today that some late December nights in Bethlehem it is cold enough for snow. Just imagine a young teenage girl, heavy with child in a drafty stable, perhaps with a manure laden floor. Just imagine how fearful they must have been that night-for their own safety (they were both ostracized from the proper society because of their situation), for the safety of the unborn child in that place.

Then who should come along claiming that God has spoken to them through angels. Some uncleaned, 'sheep-smelling' shepherds. Those shepherds were not acceptable upright folks-they were despised by most-their flocks roamed the countryside as freeloaders. The flocks pulled the grass up by the roots so it couldn't regenerate itself quickly. Some would call them in today's terms, "a blight on the landscape". One writer has compared them to modern day oil-rig workers. Yet God chose to appear in such a way. Among the despised.

When we started the tradition in the horse arena, I did not know all of Mark's story. Each year we would 'advertise' in the local paper with the address of "Good News Farm." Later I understood a little more of why it has that name.

Our United Church of Canada moderator, David Giuliano spent some of his childhood in Brampton. He tells a story about a Christmas Eve he worshipped at the Ontario Training Centre in Brampton. We knew it as a minimum security jail, where his father, Bob Giuliano was chaplain. David remembers the drive to be quite exciting as their family drove across town to worship in the chapel, with people he and his siblings imagined to be

hardened criminals. He also remembers that as they drove along there were announcements on the radio about Santa's progress going around the world, so there was lots of excitement being built up for the children.

They arrived at the chapel on the property of the jail. He later learned that it was a chapel that had been built by the inmates themselves, and it was a place where they claimed their freedom even in the midst of incarceration. The guards in those days would bring the prisoners to the chapel, but once inside, the prisoners and guards became brothers and sisters in Christ.

David remembers the chapel that night—that Christmas Eve---being filled with warm, yellow light. The service began and went pretty much as any other service he had ever been part of before. They said prayers, they sang familiar songs, there were readings from the Bible. But then communion came and it happened in a way he had never experienced before. There were no little glasses of grape juice, no carefully cut cubes of white bread. There was no polished silver chalice raised up to the sky.

Instead they were served from a loaf they'd seen torn in half before them. They drank real wine that night, and they passed the Body and the Blood of Christ hand to hand—prisoner to child, child to prisoner, guard to family member. He remembers the inmate who served him had prison tattoos on his knuckles of "love" and "hate." And he remembers that his mother wept through the whole thing. His brothers and he were filled with a mixture of concern for her and embarrassment at this open show of emotion.

After coffee and treats and well wishes, they piled back into the car, and the prisoners and guards resumed their roles in the institution. They had to wait in the car for quite a few minutes for the heater to get warm enough to clear the frost on the inside of the window. He remembers watching the steadily increasing circle of night stars through the frostiness.

It was his brother who broke the silence, his older brother. He asked their mother, "Why were you crying all through the service?"

And David remembers her response. She said, "It was just so good to eat with people who are really hungry." They drove home in silence, which was a rare thing in their family.

This night people gather all over the world as we are doing. There are likely some here this very night who are truly hungry---your hearts ache and you long for a new kind of freedom in your life. You may have tried to satisfy that hunger and that thirst in other ways. I hope that this night you will taste something of what you long for here at this table. Perhaps you will know the blessings of serving and being served, of eating together, aware of the hunger and thirst that has brought you to this place on this night. Perhaps you, too, will weep for joy at the blessing and the goodness of it, for we are all in need of the nourishment it provides. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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